

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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A Strategy for the Church in Town and Country

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What is the place of the Church in the life of our newly developing communities? Can the cultural values of rural life be preserved and incorporated into the life of the new, more urbanized community? Is the present structure of American Protestantism adequate to meet the needs of our changing community life? Will the Church stand on the sidelines, while crucial issues are fought out in community life; or will it be engaged in the struggle in such a way as to exercise a creative, redemptive influence on the outcome? If so, how? This article is an attempt to discuss the problem and to suggest an approach to a solution.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD NO LONGER DOMINANT:

The neighborhood was formerly the dominant unit of social organization. The churches were essentially of the neighborhood. Social as well as religious in nature, they had a decisive influence over the lives of the people. However, certain forces, due to changes in our social structure, have since served to weaken neighborhood ties until in many places they are gone.

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This address was given last spring before the Policy and Strategy Committee of the Michigan Council of Churches.

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CHANGE IN BASIS OF RELATIONSHIPS:

As the context of our social life has been changing from the neighborhood to the town, - so, also, the basis for our relationships with one another has changed. Neighbors do not "neighbor" as they used to. In the countryside, families who may live close to each other are often scarcely acquainted. The geographic limitations no longer determine social relationships, and people are free to associate more with those of their own choosing. Mother's friends and associates are ladies in the Extension Club, the Eastern Star, the Church Woman's Society Circle, or a Supper Club. Most of them live in the town or anywhere in the surrounding region. Some live in other communities. The schoolmates of the children live all over the area served by a large community school. Likewise, their friends consist of those active in the special interest groups in which they participate, - athletic teams, 4-H Clubs, and church youth groups.

Such special interest groups stimulate the more competitive aspects of life. The individual groups have different goals and purposes. They frequently do not agree and may work at cross purposes. They vie with each other for personal advantages and for the talents, loyalty, and support of the relatively few persons to whom the community may still look for leadership. Many communities have interest groups of some sort to promote any ideas that one can mention. There are not enough nights in the week to attend the meetings. The struggle for advantage and support is often sharp.

CHURCH BECOMES PART OF SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPING:

Thus, the social life of the community is carried on largely through a great host of special interest groups. Yes, the church is simply one of many such groups, and often it does not compare very favorably with other groups, in the minds of some. This situation is aggravated where there is a large number of churches in the community, each of which is an entity unto itself, with little if any, reference to the existence of other churches. While the individual churches may serve their respective members and constituents fairly adequately, they do not reach many others in the community. There are often spots in which few people are related to the church. This is bad. What is worse, no one or no church feels any particular sense of responsibility for them. Nobody seems to care. Many town and country churches are self-centered. They look to the community for their human and material resources, but do not feel a sense of mission to the community itself.

Consider the town-country community as a wagon wheel with the narrow triangular segments between spokes representing the

different interest groups. Each church comprises a small isolated segment in the community.

The extent of inter-church cooperation usually consists of patronizing each other's chicken suppers and bazaars, with an occasional union service. The work of the church is a "warfare" in one sense. The warfare of the Spirit is being fought on as many fronts as there are churches in the community. The Lord's forces are so dispersed that a small amount of resistance will stop them.

" We are not divided
All one body, we "

is a challenge, but far from reality. The individual churches are scarcely even in communication with each other, let alone unified in purpose.

WITHOUT COMMUNICATION THE CHURCH IS LOST:

If combat units of an army in the field do not have communication between each other on the fighting line or with the command post, they are soon lost. A local church can be lost without realizing it.

With no community wide planning or generally accepted goals between the many interest groups, the community itself shifts with the winds of fortune. It is not going anywhere in particular.

If one of the churches becomes interested in a community need, it can do little by itself unless it can involve other community organizations. This is difficult for one church to do.

The task itself is far greater than any single denomination can handle so far as reclaiming the religious unity, as opposed to religious anarchy, of the town, is concerned. The critical problem is not primarily a social one. It is theological as well. The second statement of the World Council of Churches on the Common Christian Responsibility Toward Areas of Rapid Social Change, declares:



COUNCILS MAY ACT AS CATALYTIC AGENTS:

The churches have shown phenomenal growth. With larger membership and a much wider program, they have had to increase their ministry to a greater extent. They are cooperating in many important community services. The spirit of brotherhood and good will which has made this possible is increasingly manifest in the life of the community. It has provided the social climate for men to work together for a common cause. Furthermore, the churches have made a persuasive Christian witness.

We believe that an adequate program for the church in town - country, of local, state and national Councils of Churches, should be directed toward assisting the local churches in each and every town - country community to see their responsibility in the larger setting. The Councils could well act as catalytic agents. Many problems are too big for any single church or denomination to handle. Others can be accomplished better cooperatively. The Michigan Council of Churches is launching an attempt to precipitate some degree of unity among the Protestant churches in each of the town - country communities of the state.

The emerging cooperation might well provide a gravitational pull to other churches that are ordinarily non-cooperative. Experience shows that churches of non-cooperating denominations frequently do participate in community-wide programs.

CHURCH PEOPLE HAVE A COOPERATIVE SPIRIT:

Church people generally are interested in working together for community improvement. Many churches which ordinarily do not participate in ecumenical activities will do so on the community level. Many of the laity of such churches will participate in cooperative undertakings with fellow Christians of other denominations.

CONCLUSION:

We believe that no approach would be more helpful to the denominations than that suggested here. For instance, some of us hope that the time may come when work in each town - country community may be unified by means of group ministries, larger parishes, and improved circuit arrangements. But this is not enough.

The goal of a working religious unity in the town - country community is a long term one. Like the goals of democracy and Christian brotherhood, it may never be fully realized. But, if we love our Lord enough to make sacrifices for the world which He came to save, renewed life and power may again be granted the Church. And God may move mightily across our beloved countryside.

" God's revelation of Himself in the crucified and risen Christ shows that He is the Lord of this world as well as of the church "

"This means that the church in which Christ is continually present does not exist for itself but for the world."

That portion of the world for which the local church is primarily responsible is its own community setting. This includes the relationships of the people with God and with each other, every aspect of the community life, and the conservation and use of the natural resources.

EVERY TOWN A MISSION FIELD:

Paul Minear, in the January 1958, issue of The Ecumenical Review, states, " When our ministry is defined by reference to Christ's ministry, every town becomes a mission field, a place where heaven touches earth and where the healing powers of the Kingdom encounter the demoniac infections of the world. This means that competition and rivalry among missionaries in this town represents demoniac infection rather than healing power. Whenever one Christian company is indifferent or antagonistic to another, this may be one of the subtlest forms of treason and heresy. "

Is it not true that town- country churches often are indifferent if not actually antagonistic toward each other ? Is not our attitude often that which competing business men may have for each other; - that we would be better off if the other churches were not there, - but since they are, we will try to be decent to them ?

FORGET RIVALRY AND BE FULLY CHRISTIAN:

The churches must now forget any self-concern or rivalry in a combined ministry to the community. Then, they will see their need for each other. Only then will the Church as a whole begin to be felt.

The churches have no choice but to unify their ministry. The community has a right to expect this. Rockwell Smith states in his book, " The Church in Our Town", that the chief challenge the community offers the church is "the opportunity to be fully Christian." The churches must bring the redemptive power of Christ to bear upon the entire community. Only in so doing can they themselves be redeemed.

We believe that unity of purpose and cooperative effort among the churches in the town - country community will restore

life and health to the fractured body of Christ and result in the emergence of the Church which will exercise a prophetic influence on American life. Then, and not until then, will the Church fulfil its function to be The Church.

A NEW PROGRAM IS NEEDED:

The basic strategy is apparent. The town - country churches need a new program, a change to fit today's cultural pattern. An excellent demonstration is provided by the part the churches played in the Rural Development Program of Monroe County, Ohio. Richard O. Comfort, Executive Director of the Department of Town and Country Church of the National Council of Churches, reported in the January, 1957, issue of "Town and Country Church" the almost unbelievable changes wrought in this county in only five years as a result of Church Unity in a Ministry to the Community. (See footnote.)*

Howard Phillips, the Associate County Extension Agent, with major responsibility in the field of rural development has provided further information. According to these men, "Five years ago, this was a low income rural county with inadequate schools and churches and few opportunities for young people. There had been a feeling of unrest, dissatisfaction, and helplessness in the county for years. The future looked dark."

In 1953, the Evangelical and Reformed Church held a rural life pilgrimage in which pastors and laymen visited every church and heard the story of each. A county conference was held to which church and county leaders were invited. The following spring, the Methodist Church held a one-day conference to which came other denominational leaders, a representative of the Ohio Council of Churches, the County Extension Agent, County Superintendent of Schools, and local pastors and laymen. The Monroe County Coordinated Rural Planning and Improvement Committee was formed at this meeting, with Mr. Howard Phillips, the County Extension Agent, as Chairman. The cooperating denominations each supplied a member for the committee, including the Roman Catholic Church. Other members were the County School Superintendent and representatives from each of the agricultural groups and agencies such as Farm Bureau, Grange, Soil Conservation Service, Farmers' Home Administration and the A.S.C. Office. Later, membership on the committee was extended to businessmen and others. A county ministerial association was also formed about this time.

* Dr. Richard O. Comfort has now joined the staff of Agricultural Missions, Inc., 156 Fifth Ave., New York City, as Secretary for Village Church - Community Services. He is also a member of the Executive Committee of the Christian Rural Fellowship.